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ON AND BEYOND TAYLOR'S MORAL REALISM

Arto Laitinen (2003): Strong Evaluation without Sources – On Charles Taylor's Philosophical Anthropology and Cultural Moral Realism. University of Jyväskylä.

Arto Laitinen's doctoral dissertation is a systematic work in philosophical anthropology and (meta-) ethics as well as a concise interpretation and expansion of some central aspects of the work of Charles Taylor. In terms of the organisation of arguments, the guiding of the reader and the combination of systematicity and historical background concerning the issues dealt with, it is a splendid book that is absolutely worth reading.

The scope of the book can be expressed in terms of the three main lines of argumentation: firstly, it examines Taylor's conception of "strong evaluations" and its significance for various aspects of philosophical anthropology, namely human agency, personhood, identity and interpersonal recognition; secondly, it explores the foundations of the "cultural moral realism" it argues for by positing it within ethical theory; thirdly, it disassociates from Taylor's account concerning the idea and function of so-called "moral sources". The study is divided into two parts, of which the first is dedicated to the

issue of philosophical anthropology and the second to the ethical and metaethical issues.

In part I, Laitinen defines and scrutinises Charles Taylor's conception of "strong evaluation" with the aim of outlining Taylor's philosophical anthropology. This conception is meant to provide an answer to the questions about the genuine characteristics of human agents. In chapter one, Laitinen reconstructs the conception by tracing the genesis of Taylor's answer back to the anthropological claims made by P. Strawson and H. Frankfurt. Strawson claimed that one could describe persons by their states of consciousness and their corporeal characteristics, whereas Frankfurt claimed that – while Strawson's account was held to apply to animals as well – persons are to be analyzed with reference to their capacity to have second-order volitions. A first-order desire is a desire to do x, a second-order desire is a reflective desire to desire to do x; the point about Frankfurt's term volition is that a second-order volition is a desire to have an effective desire to do x. On this account it is characteristic for myself as a person that I can have the desire effectively to have the desire to quit smoking.

Taylor's conception differs from Frankfurt's by introducing a further distinction into the second-order evaluations. According to Taylor one can evaluate one's own desire in weak or in a strong way. Weak evaluation is confined to a simple weighing of alternatives under standards of e.g. convenience. In contrast to this, in "strong evaluation our motivations are assessed in the light of *qualitative distinctions* concerning the *worth* of options" (23). It is the core of Taylor's philosophical anthropology to take the so defined strong evaluations as central conception within a web of interrelated aspects. Laitinen agrees with Taylor's basic thesis according to which "it is strong evaluation rather than mere second-order volition or mere consciousness that is distinctive of persons" (24). But according to Laitinen, Taylor's characterisation of strong evaluation as desires is imprecise, they are to be taken as evaluative beliefs. A desire to do *p* must fit the belief that "*p* is in itself good", and the exact form of this belief goes back to strong evaluation. This second-order assessment of one's desires, beliefs, actions, emotions etc. in the light of their respective worth is crucial to Taylor's anthropological account. As

Laitinen shows, the aspects of strong evaluation and identity are closely connected with regard to one's practical identity, to the way in which some features are identified with, to one's orientation for which these features are relevant and to one's motivations that are judged on the basis of strong evaluation (29).

After this exposition of the central conception, Laitinen goes on for the rest of chapter one to explore this conception in related contexts, still paying major attention to its persuasive power. First, a reconstruction of further important concepts (such as articulacy, depth and reflectivity) is given. Then, anticipating some possible Kantian criticism which could refer to the notion of strong evaluation as being too broad, Laitinen defends Taylor's account by stressing that the distinctions between moral and identity issues and between categorical and optional goods as well as the aspect of orientation on the moral map fall within the scope of strong evaluation. In discussing the complementary question as to whether the notion is too narrow, Laitinen formulates two critical points concerning Taylor's view on strong evaluations and by referring to Raz and Ricœur he argues for an extension of the account which includes 'small values' (48) and 'deontic norms' (54).

Chapter two focuses on the issue of human agency. Here, Taylor's fundamental distinction between an engaged and a disengaged view of human agents is analysed and it is demonstrated how the notions of "human", "person", "subject" and "self" relate to each other and especially to the Taylor's claims about the role of strong evaluations. Laitinen shows how Taylor employs the engaged view according to which it is essential for human agents that they "have an internal relation to their world and to others" (93). Taylor's justification of this view is based upon the transcendental argument that human agency presupposes strong evaluations. Beyond this systematic reconstruction Laitinen draws the reader's attention to a major concern of Taylor's philosophy: it is the historical claim and at the same time the philosophical diagnosis that approaches arguing for the disengaged view such as naturalism and atomism are symptomatic for a certain development in modern culture.

Chapter three turns on the issue of personhood and examines the anthropological account based on strong evaluations concerning the question of the moral status of persons. In short, as a person a human

being is strongly valued as an end-in-itself. Taylor's concept of a person, Laitinen explains, can be taken to consist of a *moral* or *normative* aspect and a *descriptive-evaluative* aspect. The first refers to the basic rights of human beings, the latter to the central capacities of a person, including the capacity for strong evaluation, which form the background of the person's moral status.

The central questions in the debate on personhood concern the specific characteristics of these capacities and what influence the mere potential for developing them has on a being's status as a person. Laitinen takes a Taylorian stand on these questions in that he supports Taylor's 'potentiality thesis' according to which "persons have naturally the central capacities in a potential form when they are born" (97), and his 'social thesis' which says that the decisive capacities can only be actualised on the basis of social mediation. With regard to Taylor's argument about the social dimension of personhood it is important to mention that his argument for this view is not communitarian. Thus it does not consider the evaluation of a person's capacities to be merely a matter of common agreement. Taylor is, as Laitinen argues, a realist concerning both the capacities and their worth, and this is the guiding principle in the discussion of potentiality.

In chapter four the connection between strong evaluation and the issue of identity is taken up. Again, instead of just jumping into the deeper parts of the issue, Laitinen introduces the topic by defining and differentiating the kinds of identity he wants to discuss: *idem*, *ipse*, collective and species-identity. His aim in this chapter is to defend "an interpretational and evaluational conception of self-identity" (114) and "the view that personal identity is a matter of self-interpretation, and collective identity is a matter of collective self-inter-pretations." (115) Both the interpretational and the evaluational aspects of identity are based on the conception of strong evaluation.

Ipse-identity is discussed as the major form of self-identity and three possible approaches to this type of identity are distinguished, whereas one's *practical identity* is constituted by one's orientation to the good, one's *biographical identity* goes back to the medium of self-interpreting and self-situating narratives, and one's *qualitative identity* is composed of one's self-definition in terms of strong evaluations and one's value horizon according to which evaluations are made.

Collective identity could be defined along these lines, but this is left open.

The last chapter of part I, chapter five, links up the anthropological topics of the previous chapters and is dedicated to interpersonal recognition. It expands the arguments concerning the role of strong evaluations to the social dimension and thus prepares the grounds and articulates the need for a discussion of value realism which is undertaken in the second part of the study. Here Laitinen connects the debate recognition closely associated with Axel Honneth's research with elements of Taylor's contribution. The point of this chapter is to show that strong evaluation is not limited to an atomistic anthropology on the one hand, and that the intersubjective sphere of recognition is value-laden on the other.

Laitinen makes four suggestions concerning interpersonal recognition: (i) the concept should be understood as multi-dimensional, practical and strict; (ii) it should be seen as "a reason-governed response to evaluative features" (140); (iii) three dimensions of recognition should be distinguished, recognition qua a person, qua a certain kind of person and qua a certain person; (iv) recognition is both a response to values and a necessary condition for personhood.

Part II is dedicated to the two ethical issues mentioned. Its aim is to move from a discussion of these issues to an extension of Charles Taylor's theory of strong evaluation. While chapters six to nine deal with "cultural moral realism" as such, chapter ten clarifies the title thesis concerning "moral sources", chapter eleven deals with evaluative beliefs and justification and chapter twelve reintegrates the anthropological perspective.

At the beginning of a concise and multi-aspect examination of cultural moral realism (= CMR) stands an introductory outline of this position which is given in chapter six. Further characterisations and systematic demarcations of CMR are provided in chapters seven to nine.

CMR is characterised as a cognitivist position as it holds that in the realm of evaluative judgments, genuinely correct and incorrect (and better and worse) judgments are possible. These judgments can be *implicit* in our moral emotions and tacit agent's knowledge, or more *explicit* in different articulations (160). The correctness of such

evaluative judgments hinges on the evaluative properties (Taylor's call them 'imports') of the respective situation, these two aspects together are to be understood in terms of a plurality of goods, ideals or values.

According to CMR the evaluative realm is only and exclusively accessible from an engaged, lifeworldly perspective and it is at the same time dependent on social forms which are historically subject to change. One cannot – this is one of the main arguments in chapter seven – exit moral reality, because it is dependent on the existence of humans and their cultures (196). Moreover, the human lifeworld as such is – as Laitinen argues – characteristically moulded out of values and norms; the space we live in is essentially value-laden, it is an evaluative and normative space of requirements, demands and claims.

But there could still remain the question whether values are culturally created. In chapter'eight, Laitinen argues that a more differentiated view than just the claim of cultural creation or construction is needed. Consequently, he suggests the distinction of five types of values and accordingly five different types of culture-ladenness of values: (i) values that are purely cultural and historical creations, (ii) purely natural values, (iii) values that can be realised without human valuers, (iv) values that are related to human universals, (v) values that are related to the human ethical and aesthetic relation to the natural environment (215-219).

Within CMR, values are considered relational and a version of McDowell's 'no-priority view' is adopted in order to express that values are neither subjective in the sense of projectivism nor objective in the sense of Platonism.

Chapter nine turns on the metaethical issues concerning the claims about the diversity, universality and validity of goods. Laitinen deepens and examines various possible counter-arguments and restrictive claims against the claims of CMR. Does the culture-ladenness of values require a non-objectivist, relativist or internalist account of evaluative knowledge? Does a cultural embedding of evaluative practices obstruct a qualified objectivist view? Laitinen claims it does not and (still integrating and occasionally modifying Taylor's views) provides a thorough justification of the claims made in chapter six. This leads to the rejection of both relativism and internalism (241-245, cf. 170).

He takes up Joseph Raz 'reversal argument' according to which both the plurality and the culture-dependence of values support the cultural diversity of evaluative views. Following the restrictions concerning the culture-dependence of values made in the eighth chapter, Laitinen modifies this plain reversal argument and specifies the strongly interrelated concepts of universality and validity (251-255).

Chapter ten develops and justifies the major thesis of part II which says that CMR does not need moral sources or constitutive goods. Laitinen firstly reconstructs and critically assesses Taylor's version of CMR in two steps. The first deals with the first level of Taylor's account which can be summarised in terms of three main theses: (i) values are relational and culturally laden, (ii) values can be disclosed from the engaged lifeworldly perspective – this is taken to be an epistemological view –, (iii) values are universally valid (259-261). The second step refers to the "ontological background pictures" Taylor postulates as implicit in value-experiences. By reference to the ontological features of the bearers of values one can detect the according evaluative features and thus make "sense of our moral reactions". (264)

Laitinen's concern is to show that this first step already constitutes a sufficient account of CMR, so in a second step he needs to provide an argument against Taylor's conception of constitutive goods for the constitution of goods. In Taylor's view moral agents have access to "the source of the value, or goodness, of the ideals of evaluative properties" (266), they have a conception of the so-called 'constitutive goods'. As Taylor does not defend the view that there is only one such higher-level source, he postulates a plurality of sources or constitutive goods which – according to one of Laitinen's critical arguments – ultimately falls in one with the plurality of relational first-level goods. And a source that practically does not play the central role that is ascribed to it turns out to be rather superfluous than constitutive.

Laitinen suggests to work with a 'sourceless' CMR. This version would take the experiences of evaluative features to refer solely to the evaluative properties of the bearers of values and it would rather do without constitutive goods than with an implausible picture of them.

Chapter eleven is dedicated to the discussion of beliefs and moral knowledge. It poses and responds to five epistemological questions: (i) how do we acquire beliefs? (ii) Is there objective truth about evaluative claims? (iii) How does epistemological justification run? (iv) Does an agent's autonomy imply his moral entitlement? (v) Do evaluative stances determine practical reasons? Chapter twelve deals with this last question and reintegrates the aspect of individual orientation to the good that played a central role in the anthropological part of the study. This 'orientation to the good' which is partly constitutive for identity has to be distinguished from a practical 'commitment to the good' which themselves act as practical reasons. The final argument returns to probably *the* central aspect of Taylor's practical philosophy: the relation between the self and the good. The complex task of "leading one's life a determining one's identity" is viewed in terms of "balancing the demands of stance-neutral worthwhileness on the one hand, and the demands of autonomy and authenticity on the other" (329).

The last chapter of the study, number thirteen, provides a summarising conclusion of the whole book. It recapitulates the course of the argumentation and especially stresses various interconnections between arguments and their implications.